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DOMESTIC LIFE IN ENGLAND TO-DAY

BY MRS. C. S. PEEL, O.B.E.

IN what we now regard as the happy days before the War the domestic life of middle and upper-middle English people was built upon a foundation of cheap fuel, cheap food and cheap labor. In families of moderate means it was usual to pay cooks from \$120¹ to \$170, houseparlor-maids \$90 to \$140, parlormaids \$120 to \$150, housemaids \$90 to \$140, "betweenmaids"—that is young girls helping cook and houseparlormaid—\$60 to \$90 per annum. People in such circumstances employed one, two, three or even four servants who lived in and were content with an outing every other Sunday and once a week. The sum spent on food in such households varied from about \$2.50 to \$3.50 per head per week, \$3.00 being an average figure. There was a plethora of charwomen who asked 60 cents a day and their food. Job servants were plentiful at wages varying from \$2.50 to \$3.50 a week living in, and in the case of cooks \$3.25 to \$5 per week. Milk then cost 8 cents instead of 22 cents per quart, bread 10 cents as against 18 cents per quartern, butter 32 to 41 cents instead of 60 cents per lb., sugar 6 cents against 14 cents per lb., while meat from 16 cents to 28 cents per lb. then is now from 28 to 62 cents per lb.

It is true that even before the War the domestic worker had become extremely discontented with her lot, and the supply of women servants other than "job" or "daily" had not for many years sufficed to meet the demand, but the shortage was not acute as it has since become, and if the employee was, as mistresses said, independent, the employer was little less so.

The years which have elapsed since 1914 find house-

¹ These figures are roughly estimated on the basis of the old rate of exchange in pounds sterling.—Editor.

wives of moderate means (or, as it is the fashion to call them, the "New Poor") in a very different position from that which they formerly enjoyed, for only by very careful management can they now make the income suffice for the reasonable needs of the family. The rich, on the other hand, are but little affected because, when money is no object, good service is still obtainable and however dear food may be they can afford to buy it; but for persons whose incomes never allowed of luxury, heavy taxation, rising rates and the high cost of living (130 per cent more than in 1914) is a painful burden. The money wage demanded by domestic workers has greatly increased, and as her choice is so limited the employer must take anyone she can get and try to be thankful, or go servantless.

But to go servantless is not as easy as it sounds. Our pre-war country houses are inconvenient enough, but the town basement house is indeed a triumph from the labor-wasting point of view. In our kitchens are coal consuming monsters known as kitchen ranges, so inefficient that they waste from 10 to 15 per cent of all the fuel with which they are fed. In town basement houses there is generally, attached to the kitchen, a scullery containing a sink, on the other side of the scullery a larder, and at the opposite end of the basement a coal cellar. From coal cellar to range, from range to sink, from sink to larder and back again walks the cook, and until lately no one troubled to estimate how many hours a week she spent in walking, nor the time wasted and fatigue occasioned by this unintelligent arrangement of her workshop.

In these basement houses of many stairs, service lifts are still almost unknown. There are open fires in each room to which coals must be carried. The smoke from millions of chimneys pollutes the atmosphere. In one large town alone it is estimated that the calculable smoke damage costs \$5,000,000 a year. The grime manufactured at stupendous cost in money and human energy penetrates again into the houses to sully all with which it comes in contact, thereby lengthening the bill for redecoration, cleaning and washing. From the pantry and kitchen in the basement all the utensils and food required for the dining room meals must be carried up and down. Recent experiments showed that in a family of six persons, dining late and living simply but comfortably, from 26 to 30 cwt. of

table utensils and provisions was carried up an 8 ft. 6 in. high flight of stairs, and the greater part of it carried down those stairs again each week, while in an old-fashioned basement such as I have described the maid walked 350 feet in the process of preparing and serving afternoon tea! From basement to top floor of an ordinary small London house the height is about 40 ft.; in six journeys a steep hill of 80 yards has been climbed.

It is only now beginning to dawn upon those who are responsible for building our houses that the modern science of costings, that is the practice of measuring the use of material and energy as a guide to action and which is now applied to industrial work, must be applied to domestic work, and that the home must be planned and fitted with consideration for the cost of labor needed to keep it in a seemly condition.

The unintelligent arrangement of our houses has had some effect in bringing about the rapidly growing dislike of domestic work which is so noticeable to-day, and which is causing much real distress to mistresses of households, and especially to those who are mothers of families.

On enquiry at various registry offices and institutions dealing with the placing of young women in domestic service one is met always with the statement that girls do not like domestic service, and that they will not adopt that method of earning their living unless they are obliged to do so by economic pressure. So serious did the shortage of domestic labor become in 1918 that a Government Committee was formed to enquire into the matter. This Committee was divided into Sub-Committees upon which served a number of prominent women such as Viscountess Rhondda, the Marchioness of Londonderry, President of the Women's Legion, Miss Clementina Black, the well-known writer, Dr. Janet Lane Claypon, Head of the Household and Social Science Department of King's College for Women, Dame Katherine Furse, Controller of the "Wrens," Dr. Marion Phillips, Chief Woman Officer to the Labor Party, and several others. From the evidence collected it became clear, as I have said, that the long hours of hard and dirty work made necessary by badly planned houses was one of the causes of unpopularity, another, and an important one, being the low social status accorded to the servant, not by the superior order of employer but by the

servants' friends and relations, and by workers in other industries and professions. A further grievance, and a very real one, was the small amount of free time at the disposal of the domestic.

The question of social status is perhaps one with which it is most difficult to deal.

In days gone by women were so sickened by domestic drudgery, from which conditions of social life made it impossible for the large majority of them to escape, that when they began to enjoy the benefit of better education and found themselves able to take their place in professional and industrial life as independent, self-supporting workers there was a great re-action. The intelligent girl became a shorthand typist, a shop girl, a civil servant; the ill-educated, stupid girl stayed in the home. Women—wives and mothers—were spoken of as "idle women" or as "domestic drudges." Bringing up children, cooking, keeping houses clean and healthy was regarded as work needing little intelligence and no training.

From this harmful state of affairs much of the trouble from which we are suffering to-day has sprung. Servants were often overworked because mistresses were ashamed to perform domestic tasks, or at all events to be seen performing them. War conditions have altered to some extent this "genteel" attitude, though even now it must be confessed that many women who scrubbed and cooked and polished in hospitals and canteens do not like to perform, or to be seen to perform, similar work in their own homes. The servant, realizing the mental attitude of the employer, began to adopt it until what should be one of the finest and most attractive professions is despised and disliked.

Until the shortage of servants became acute little was done to alter conditions, or to obtain training for those young women who did desire to become domestic workers. They were obliged to learn their work when and how they could, fortunate indeed if they entered situations where they were taught their duties in an intelligent manner. More often than not, though they learned to perform certain work, they were not taught the reason why it should be performed, or performed in one fashion rather than another. The standard of cooking was low though the expenditure on food was generally high. There was a perverted admiration of waste and extravagance. The house-

mistress who endeavored to practice economy was "no lady."

The Sub-Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction Advisory Committee which dealt specially with the training of servants reported as follows:

Our investigations have made it evident to us that one of the root causes which has led to the present low status of domestic service as an occupation is the lack of provision of means for such training as will enable a girl to become a skilled worker. We are aware that training of this kind is provided to a limited extent, but we find from the evidence that has been given before us that parents are, in too many cases, unable to meet the immediate financial loss which they must suffer, if they encourage their daughters to undergo such training rather than to enter a commercial or industrial occupation. We are of opinion that so long as facilities for adequate training are beyond the reach of the vast majority of working-class homes, so also will the occupation suffer from its present lack of status, and continue to receive the greater number of its recruits from amongst women who are driven into it by economic necessity. Further, it is essential that domestic service should take its place as a skilled occupation, and that the conditions of employment should be made comparable to those which exist in other industrial and commercial occupations.

The Committee also mentioned that in 1914 the total number of Domestic Service Schools in England and Wales was ten, making provision roughly for about 350 girls. There were also eighteen Domestic Economy Schools, but these were not intended for training domestic servants but for training home workers and, in any case, only provided for 700 pupils. During the War a number of these schools closed. There are other Poor Law Schools and Institutions, charitable and otherwise, which provide some kind of domestic training, but the number is utterly insufficient in a country in which the census returns, decade after decade, show domestic service as the largest single occupation of British women.

In matters appertaining to domestic service as to house planning no one troubled to calculate either the money cost of inefficiency, or to take into account the loss in health and happiness caused by the employment of untrained domestic workers. However, the discomforts which we have endured, and still do endure, will have been worth while enduring if in time to come they result in the erection of labor-saving houses, and of a total re-organization of the domestic profession.

That the public is awaking to the necessity for the re-organization is made evident by the number of schemes which have now been launched.

The Y. W. C. A. are making an interesting experiment. They have opened a small hostel for Daily Domestic Workers where girls receive a thorough training in all branches of domestic service. The girls live in the hostel, and go out for a wage of 20 cents per hour and their travelling expenses, and provide their own food. Their day is limited to eight hours, after which they may work if they please at overtime wages.

The Marchioness of Londonderry, President of the Women's Legion which provided women cooks for camps as well as other workers during the war years, has instituted a Household Service Section at 447, Oxford Street, W. 1. Women who formerly served in the Women's Legion and wish to join the Household Service Section are expected to wear the Legion badge when on duty, and are entitled to wear the uniform of the Legion at their own expense off duty. A form of agreement is signed by employer and legionary, and amongst the conditions are that two consecutive hours irrespective of time for meals, half a day every week, four hours each Sunday or eight hours on alternate Sundays, a holiday of one week after six months' service, or fourteen days in each year on full wages must be granted by the employer. If the legionary has been in her situation for twelve months, board wages must be given for the holiday, in addition to the ordinary wages. Legionaries are expected to co-operate with their employers and fellow-workers in the interchange of duties in order that their hours of work may not interfere with the necessary routine of the house. There is no training scheme in conjunction with the Legion Household Service Section, but each recruit must serve a probationary term of three months in a household before she can be accepted as a legionary. A probation badge is supplied during this period. The Women's Legion then accepts her as a legionary, though it can have no practical method of testing her capabilities.

Another institution, The Domestic Workers' Employment Bureau, has been opened at 19 Buckingham Street, Charing Cross. It is hoped by its parent, The National Federation of Women Workers, that, given a fair wage and good prospects, more girls will offer themselves for

domestic work, and that they will consider it worth their while to fit themselves for what should be a really good profession. The good mistress, it is claimed, will find nothing revolutionary in the rules, and will benefit by knowing exactly where she stands.

The programme includes a minimum wage for resident domestic workers of \$4.50 per week, or \$12.50 a month, rising according to experience; set meal hours; decent sleeping accommodation; allowance for laundry; two hours' free time each day, and a half-day a week; twelve hour day, including time off; employer to supply uniform if required, and to pay for the cost of the washing; and fourteen days' holiday each year with full board wages. Even on these conditions the number of workers applying to the Society up to the present time is not sufficient to meet the demand of the employers.

Other Employment Bureaus for domestic service have been organized in the provinces by women interested in the subject, most of which are based on the same lines as those already described, and the Women's Industrial Council (York Street, Adelphi, London) have also made an effort to lighten the burden of the housewife by inaugurating a scheme to supply educated, experienced, middle-aged women as home helps to invalid housewives. These women do not take the place of trained nurses, of servants, or of charwomen, but are intended to perform such duties as fall to the lot of the middle-class housewife when in health.

And more recently another effort has been made to induce women to return to domestic service by linking up the Labor Exchanges with certain approved Registry Offices, and it remains to be seen if, as out-of-work donations cease, women applying to the Labor Exchanges will be persuaded to join the depleted ranks of the domestic worker.

There is little doubt that War conditions have increased the dislike of young women for domestic service. In industrial life the women live among their social equals and are not, as one girl expressed it, constantly reminded that "you're only a servant," while life in the uniformed Women's Service has popularized the hostel system. Members of these war services greatly appreciated the cheerful club life which they were enabled to enjoy after working hours; hence the widely expressed

determination not again to become a servant who "lives in."

This expression of opinion is most unpopular with employers, who point out, with much reason, that homes cannot be organized in the same manner as factories and institutions, and that when men are working they need the chief hot meal of the day on their return. They remind the woman worker that, in good service, she is lodged and fed in a manner superior to that usually obtained by the girl in business or in industrial work. Generally when a servant changes a situation her fare and the postage for her correspondence regarding that situation is paid by the employer, a month's notice is given to terminate her engagement (provided she is paid by the month), her washing bill is paid and full wages given during her holiday. She has no fares to pay to and from her work, and if she is a competent servant she is highly considered by the employers and well treated in the matter of gifts at Christmas, tips and so forth, while her wages, counting in addition to the money wage the cost of board and lodging and washing, are quite as high as those obtainable by other women of similar education and capabilities.

But the working girl is firm; she does *not* like service and she will not, if she can help it, return to service if she is required to "live in."

Strange to say, the male servant who has been uprooted shows no reluctance to return to his pre-war position, which may be explained by the fact that men servants for many years past have been employed almost entirely in luxurious establishments; they have been far better paid than women and accorded more freedom.

Meanwhile, under the stress of changed conditions such as the shortage and high price of labor, food, fuel, and rent, we witness an increasing simplicity of middle-class home life: silver is put away; meals are less elaborate; rooms emptier of ornaments, of flowers; children are clad in stuff frocks with knickerbockers to match, rather than frilled, embroidered "tub wear."

Amongst those who can afford it the habit of eating in public grows apace. Restaurants are crowded, not only in London but in provincial cities and small country towns.

The difficulties of home life have become so great that the hotels and boarding houses are crowded, and as pre-

vailing conditions also affect them, those of the less expensive order are none too comfortable.

Another notable change in our national life is the general adoption of preserved or freshly cooked "ready to eat" foods. Before the War some of the large stores included a cooked provisions department amongst their attractions; since the War these have been greatly enlarged and many other establishments have engaged in the "ready to eat" food trade. This is the case not only in London but in provincial towns and in the small country towns. Cooked meats and birds, fried fish, fish cakes, fish salads, potato salad, Russian salad, potato chips, pies of all kinds, croquettes, sauces, puddings and sweets are provided and eagerly purchased, while in houses where tinned and bottled foods were once unknown they are now welcome, and new "time and trouble savers" are eagerly noted and tested.

The scarcity and high cost of fuel has brought into use new methods of cooking. Ovens are used but once or twice a week and housewives have learned to steam bread and cakes and make wonderful use of the frying pan.

Now that educated women are often obliged to do their own house-work there is a great demand for labor-saving household apparatus, and the interest taken in the housing question is intense and must in the future lead to the erection of the "efficiency home" for which we crave.

With the more general use of gas, electrical, and oil cookers a different style of cooking utensil is coming into favor, and the casserole (and in a short time the glass saucepan and baking dish only just introduced into the country) will replace the old-fashioned pots and pans.

At the moment domestic life is not easy; we cannot live as we have been accustomed to live, and we have not yet adapted ourselves to the changes which are inevitable and for which, in the end, we may come to be thankful. In the past the energies of woman have been exhausted in work which did not justify itself. There is no industry so large as the home-making industry, and no industry perhaps in which the worker's energies are so ill regulated, the tools so inadequate and the results so little in relation to the money, material and labor expended.

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